

# How Program/Organizational Structure Shapes the Performance and Sustainability of Student-Led Co-curricular Community Service Programs

**John Sarvey**  
School of Public Policy & Urban Affairs  
Northeastern University

**Heather McNew Schill**  
Center for Excellence in Learning Through Service  
Berea College



## Background and Why Co-curricular Service is So Critical

Robust, high-quality, and consistent student led co-curricular service programs are a critical element of overall institutional civic engagement.

**Student-led co-curricular service as primary platform for sustained student involvement**  
While service-learning courses provide the opportunity to go deeper with analysis and reflection and convey faculty guidance to students, service-learning will not constitute the primary platform through which students engage in long-term (i.e., 1-4 years of sustained, regular involvement in a particular volunteer opportunity). Most students will be much more likely to sustain their involvement if serving within a social structure, like a co-curricular service program.

**Structural apathy vs. personal apathy**  
Personal apathy occurs when students are not engaged due to personal characteristics: lack of interest, lack of motivation, etc. Structural apathy provides an alternative explanation. Students are not as engaged as they could be due to the lack of the right structures and opportunities to engage them. If structural apathy is a primary factor, then overcoming apathy and engaging students requires finding and using the most effective structure or approach.

**How do you achieve high quality, sustained engagement in co-curricular service?**  
An informal assessment of student led, co-curricular community service programs reveals a strong correlation between program strength (quality, sustainability, capacity to engage, and outcomes) and program structure. Nearly all programs assessed as “strong” share a common organizational / programmatic model.

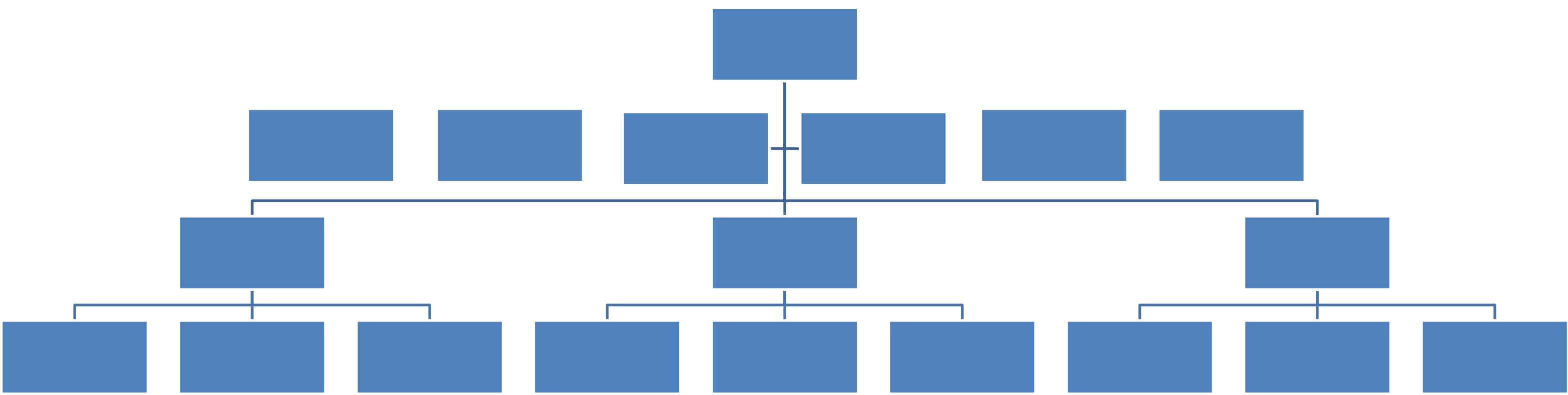
**Three Predominant Models**  
In fact, we discovered three predominant models throughout the nation. One common model we’ll call the “Clearinghouse Model.” In this model, programs collect and organize volunteer opportunities and then promote these opportunities to individual students. While a useful function to exist on a campus, it is grossly ineffective as a substantial platform for engaging students.

If the second model had a name, we might term it “kitchen sink.” It entails creating lots of different unique kinds of programs and events, one-day service opportunities, alternative breaks, etc. It’s often combined with the clearinghouse model. One characteristic of this model is that it often relies on an enormous amount of staff time. It seems like there is never enough staff.

The third model was found at nearly every strong service program in the nation. We call it the “Coalition of Projects Model.”

## The Coalition of Projects Model

The Coalition of Projects Model describes a type of organizational and operational structure for campus-based community service programs. Generally, this organizational structure is characterized by an umbrella organization of several, semi-autonomous projects each with its own focus on a particular issue or community, and its own set of leaders and volunteers. It also include a set of overall student leaders who provide a range of leadership and support functions to all the projects.



- Characteristics**
- 1. Umbrella organization of multiple projects
  - 2. Issue or neighborhood focused projects
  - 3. Group coordination of volunteers
  - 4. Cascading leadership structure
  - 5. Coalition-wide support functions for the projects
  - 6. Systematic training of project leaders
  - 7. Systematic exchange of challenges and best practices among projects
  - 8. Systematic quality improvement process ie community service funding board
  - 9. New project incubator
  - 10. Office space that’s student-oriented, has a “hang out” quality

- Advantages**
- This structure, found at nearly every strong service program in the nation, makes possible, facilitates and supports a range of benefits and advantages:
- facilitates quality, meaningful, high impact service
  - creates meaningful student leadership opportunities
  - provides for a systematic capture and transfer of knowledge
  - provides frequent, relevant internal organizational advice through experienced peers
  - creates systematic processes for transition
  - creates organizational capacity to engage large numbers of students in sustained, quality service
  - shifts staff roles to areas of highest value

**Building It Up**  
As an initiative of the IMPACT Conference, the Building It Up program is designed to assist campuses in building and developing the capacity of their co-curricular community service programs, primarily through adoption of the Coalition of Projects organizational structure, or for programs that already have the basic structure but are interested in adopting or modifying some of the more advanced elements of the model.

Participating Campuses		
• 1-3 year process per campus	Pilot Year	3-4 campuses
• Leadership Team	Year One	6-8 campuses
• Initial Assessment	Year Two	8-12 campuses
• Implementation Plan		
• Learning Community		
• Site Visit to a Campus with the Structure		

- National Program Team**
- Primarily student affairs professionals and possibly advanced student leaders and recent graduates
  - Roles: Assessment, Research, Facilitation, Training, Consulting
  - Overall participation as volunteer, possibility of consulting stipends from participating campuses

- Research Agenda**
- Literature review
    - Sustained co-curricular service
    - Civic identity development
    - Cascading leadership models
  - Conduct study to test/validate the theory
  - Collect additional detail about the characteristics
  - Collect best practices among programs that have the model

## Shifts allocation of roles

### Clearinghouse or Kitchen Sink Models

Role/Task	Staff	Agency Staff	Student
Find Potential Opportunities	●		
Establish Partnerships with Schools and Agencies	●		
Design/Set up Service Activities & Roles for Volunteers	●	●	
Recruit Student Volunteers	●	?	
Match Students to Volunteer Opportunities	●	?	
Coordinate Volunteer Schedules	●?	?	
Formal Orientation & Training	?	●	
Informal Orientation & Training	?		
Perform Service			●
On-site Supervision	?	●	
Reflection	?	?	
Evaluation	?	?	
Program Improvements	●	●	

### Coalition of Projects Model

Role/Task	Staff	Agency Staff	Student Leaders	Student
Find Potential Opportunities			●	
Establish Partnerships with Schools and Agencies			●	
Design/Set up Service Activities & Roles for Volunteers		●	●	
Recruit Student Volunteers		?	●	
Match Students to Volunteer Opportunities		?	●	
Coordinate Volunteer Schedules		?	●	
Formal Orientation & Training		●	●	
Informal Orientation & Training			●	
Perform Service			●	●
On-site Supervision		●	●	
Reflection		?	●	
Evaluation		?	●	
Program Improvements		●	●	

Role/Task	Staff
Support Organizational/Program Design	●
Recruit Student Leaders	●
Train Student Leaders	●
Advise Student Leaders	●
Work with Student Leaders on design of systems and processes	●
Assist with Partnership Selection and Relationship Mgmt	●
Promote Visibility among Key Campus Constituents/Administration	●
Secure Resources	●
Connect Student Leaders to Regional and National Networks	●
Teach Service-Learning Course to Student Leaders	●
Reflection among Student Leaders	●
Develop and Help Manage or Advise System for Evaluation & Continuous Program Improvements	●